That’s what he said: an empirical investigation on reporting slurs

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The last twenty years witnessed a growing interest in slurs in philosophy and linguistics. A noteworthy feature of pejoratives is that pejorative content tends to project out of semantic embedding. In this paper, we present three studies on how slurs and other pejoratives work in direct and reported speech. The question that indirect report raises is whether the *verbum dicendi* ‘say’ can seal the offensive force of pejoratives. Our three studies together provide interesting findings:

(i) The Pilot study shows that are perceived as more offensive than insults, when considered in isolation (*Fig. 1*).

(ii) Study 1 shows a surprising finding that distinguishes slurs from insults and neutral labels (*Fig. 2*, left panel). A slur embedded in an utterance of the form ‘X is a P’ is *less* offensive than a slur in isolation, while an insult is more offensive when it occurs in a ‘X is a P’ sentence, i.e. when it is attributed to a person, rather than in isolation. This fact is not predicted by any theory of slurs and insults; we propose to explain this difference by appealing to the double function of slurs: they are not just about evaluating negatively but they also provide descriptive information.

(iii) Study 2 shows that utterances featuring slurs or insults are perceived as *less* offensive when embedded in a report (even though still offensive; *Fig. 2*, right panel). This contradicts Anderson and Lepore (2013a), (2013b), and Anderson (2016)’s predictions on slurs in reported speech, it poses difficulties to Schlenker (2007), while being compatible with Capone (2016).
Figure 1. Average values of offensiveness for the different types of words. Error bars indicate standard errors.

Figure 2. Left: Average values of offensiveness for the different types of words. Error bars indicate standard errors; Right: Average values of offensiveness for the different types of words in the two different Report conditions (direct speech and indirect speech). Error bars indicate standard errors.